Paths of Peace (Darkei Shalom) in the Jewish Tradition

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In an address given at a meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, Rabbi Michael A. Signer, Abrams Professor in the Department of Theology of the University of Notre Dame (U.S.A.), explores the variety of meanings of shalom (peace) in Jewish thought, liturgy, and life.

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Michael A. Signer

The power of greeting and the potential of peace

It is the idea of greeting that animates this investigation of “shalom.” There is much to be learned about a society and a civilization from its rituals of greeting. What is the meaning of greeting another human being? We receive them into our presence. We prepare ourselves for an encounter. We ready ourselves to behold the countenance of another human being that is created in the image of God. Yet at the moment of greeting we also engage in a risk: we are uncertain how we shall be received. This may account for the difference between greeting a trusted friend and the first time we acknowledge the presence of another that wishes to come within the ambit of our conversation and our lives.

How differently we Jews and Christians who have engaged in these discussions since 1965 greet one another. Yet, we recall those who came before us – and at much greater risk – were willing to speak before those who did not greet them with “shalom.” I think specifically here of Martin Buber who told an audience in 1938 that Jews and Christians shared a “book and a hope.” Later, during the first hopeful steps toward a genuine greeting of “shalom” between our communities Abraham Joshua Heschel declared:

First and foremost we meet as human beings who have much in common: a heart, a face, a voice, the presence of a souls, fears hope, the ability to trust, a capacity for compassion and understanding, the kingship of being human. My first task in every encounter is to comprehend the personhood of the person I face, to sense the kinship of being human, solidarity of being.

To meet a human being is a major challenge to mind and heart. . . . The human is a disclosure of the divine and all men are one in God’s care for humanity.

To meet a human being is an opportunity to sense the image of God, the *presence* of God. . . . When engaged in a conversation with a person of different religious commitment, if I discover that we disagree in matters sacred to us, does the image of God I face disappear? Does the difference in commitment destroy the kinship of being human?[1]

Heschel moves the possibility for encounter between Jews and Christians from the of abstraction to the reality of human existence. His exhortation resonates with the highly sophisticated philosophical system of Emanuel Levinas who has declared that “Ethics is optics.” The gaze of the other human being draws one into a network of responsibility for the Other that places as the foundation of our being in the world. In a system where ethics precedes ontology the entry into human encounter holds a profound depth with serious consequence.

Drawing another human being, a human face, into our lives means that the first word—the creation of the possibility for communication holds great moment. When we are in situations that are unfamiliar to us, we greet another with “shalom” with the hope that somewhere in the conversations and actions that follow upon our first encounter the possibility of “peace” and well being will be created.

We Jews greet with “Shalom ‘aleichem” and thereby call into possibility a network of references to the texts of our *Torah shebikhtav* (Written Torah) and *Torah shebe’al peh* (Oral Torah). Biblicists have investigated the lexical meaning of shalom. Their research indicates that shalom denotes a sense of wholeness or completeness.[2] However, its semantic range is far broader than the absence of war or conflict. It connotes the conscious effort to understand that both animate and inanimate objects have the possibility for a sense of wholeness and tranquillity that is a potential to be realized. The lens for viewing how this wholeness comes into reality will lead us through several texts from the classical period of rabbinic Judaism. Wherever possible, we shall attempt to restrict our investigation to the Tannaitic stratum. However, we shall also take the liberty of quoting later sources when they illuminate the earlier.

Who is the author of peace?

In the most intimate hours that Jews spend in their communities of worship the prayer texts before their eyes present a singular source of all wholeness and well being. It is God, the Source of all Sources, the “King whose name is Peace.”[3] The doxology of the Kaddish that punctuates the major rubrics of the service concludes with the Scriptural verse from Job 25:2 “May the One who makes Peace in the Heavens (lit: the High Places) make peace for us and all Israel. Let us say, ‘Amen.’” The Creator of all has the power to establish harmony in the supernal worlds. The use of the participial form of “’Oseh” with respect to the upper worlds indicates a continuous action that may be contrasted with the imperfect tense “ya’aseh” (strengthened by the repetition of the pronoun “Hu”) that reveals a situation of potentiality – of an optative, of hoping that God will bring peace to us and all of Israel. The abyss between the unseen heavens and the partially known world of terrestrial existence is bridged by the hope that wholeness will come from God.

This statement of communal hope is reinforced in the *Chatimot*, the collects, of other prayers. After the evening recitation of the *Shema* on the Sabbath, the prayer *Hashkivenu* “Cause us to lie down in peace” is recited with the concluding words, “Blessed are You O Lord, who spreads a tabernacle of peace over us and over his people and over Jerusalem”[4] This prayer uses the beautiful image of the “sukkah,” the temporary shelter in all its fragility that expresses the equally gossamer web or peace or wholeness that Israel hopes God will establish.

In the concluding prayer of the eighteen benedictions – recited three times a day – the rubric focuses on peace. God is urged to bring an eternal peace to Israel – that they might know wholeness and prosperity. In both the evening and morning versions of this prayer the worshipper affirms the hope that God “blesses Israel, His people, with peace.” On the three festivals – and daily in the land of Israel – the Aaronide blessing which concludes, “May God bless you and keep

you accompanies this prayer for peace. May God illuminate his countenance for you and be gracious to you. May God lift up the divine countenance to You and establish peace for You."[5] The Aaronide blessing confirms the idea that God is the sole source of wholeness or peace. Peace is the highest rung on the three-part ladder in the rhetoric of the blessing: God keeps or guards us. God bestows grace upon us *(chen)*, and ultimately establishes *shalom* for us.

Let us note, however, that the Aaronide blessing returns us to the image of greeting. Two of the three members of the blessing refer to the notion of the divine countenance reaching toward humankind – God's light illumines the grace which extends to humans; and the turning or uplift of the divine face – perhaps a sign of recognition (as it were) – allows for the "placing" of peace/wholeness upon us.

Based on these observations about the sole source of peace resting in the divine realm we can now raise the following question: Is the Jewish individual a passive element in the process of wholeness? Put another way, if God makes peace in the high places and will ultimately do so on earth, do human beings have any part in establishing or working towards peace in the realms designated for us. We may feign shock at the outrageous nature of this question and begin to load our arguments from many sources about the nature of human responsibility. Let me beg your indulgence and arrive at the responsibility of the individual Jew and the people Israel through a bit more circuitous route.

Prayerful intention and intentional greeting

In the second chapter of Mishnah Berakhot we learn that

If a person is reading in a Torah scroll and the time for reading the *Shema* arrives, if he has demonstrated intentionality for prayer that person has met his obligation for fulfilling the commandment. If he does not, the he has not fulfilled the commandment. During the established sections of the Shema a person may greet another out of respect and return a greeting. In the midst of a section, one may greet and return a greeting on account of fear or awe. This is the opinion of Rabbi Meier. Rabbi Judah says, "In the midst of the sections he may greet on account of awe and return a greeting on account of honor. In between sections he may greet on account of honor and return (a greeting of) "Peace" (shalom) to any person.[6]

The juxtaposition of two sacred tasks is presented. One may be engaged in the task of reading the text of Deuteronomy 6:4 as part of Scriptural study. If the appropriate time arrives to fulfill the commandment of reciting that passage as a prayer arrives, then one must "direct one's heart" or demonstrate a specific intention to read the passage in Scripture as the prayer itself. However, the problem becomes more complex as the Mishnah describes the dilemma in the place where the prayers of the rubric Shema and its blessings are recited. Put simply, the Mishnah asks when it is appropriate to deviate one's attention from the recitation of prayer in order to greet *(sho'el)* or return a greeting from a fellow worshipper? The resolution of the problem by two Tannaim, Rabbi Meier and Rabbi Judah are offered. The specifics of their answer are less important for our purposes than the categories themselves.

Both Tannaim approach the problem with the division of the rubric into "sections" (*peraqim* – literally "chapters"). These sections are considered either as whole units – one may interrupt between them or in their midst. Let us note the categories that might motivate the greeting: either "honor/respect" *(kavod)* or "fear" *(yir'ah)*. These categories form the primary units of rabbinic piety in approaching the Deity. There is no argument between R. Meier and R. Judah that one must interrupt the prayers. Their dispute is when the greeting might be offered and what the motivation for the greeting might be. Attention may appropriately be diverted from the prayers for the very same reasons that one approaches the deity. To wish "shalom" to another or to respond to the

greeting of “Shalom ‘aleichem” of another may be the first step toward the realization that the Mishnah considers the house of prayer and the praying community a reflection of the macrocosm of God. The greeting of peace at the right moment sets the balance between the acknowledgment of God’s unity and the recognition that God’s image in the form of another human being who deserves honor or fear appears. Communion with the apt intention toward the unity of God, whose gracious gift is peace seems to be balanced with human efforts toward creating a reciprocal network of creating a community whose greeting is peace. Towards that end we can understand the admonition of Abbaye:

A man should always be keen-witted about the fear of God giving a soft answer that turns away wrath (Prov.15:1), increasing peace with his brethren and relatives and with all human beings – even the idolaters in the street so that he may be beloved above and popular on earth and acceptable to his fellow creatures.[7]

“Shalom” then is not exclusively the gracious gift of God. Human beings have a role to play in bringing about the sense of wholeness or completion. Mortal human beings may not be able to experience or even describe the dimensions of wholeness, but in greeting one another they remind themselves of the task. To increase peace *(marbeh shalom)* is an expression of human effort toward the goal of wholeness that we will have the opportunity to hear again from the Rabbis.

Berit Shalom (Covenant of Peace) and Zevah Shelemim (Sacrificial Offerings of Peace)

The possibility of a *berit shalom*, “a covenant of peace” between God and humanity is mentioned three times in the Tanakh (Leviticus 25:12; Ezekiel 34:25-26 and 37:26). When the possibility of a covenant is introduced the dynamics of a human and divine connection with respect to peace becomes a possibility. God will offer a covenant of peace in which human beings may share and benefit. The idea of the *Zevah Shelemim* mentioned in the book of Leviticus also holds forth the possibility of the presenting an offering to God on the altar – he point of mediation between the One in heavens and those who present themselves as loyal members of the covenanted community. In both cases – the covenant and the offerings – we discern that shalom is part of the relationship between God and humanity.

The individual who is granted the *berit shalom* is Pinchas ben Eliezer, the priest who acts zealously on God’s behalf and ends the life of those who would commit idolatry, the act of betrayal of the One whose name is Peace. The Rabbis expound the promise of this covenant extended to Pinchas:

Great is the peace that God gave Pinchas for the world is governed only by peace and all of the Torah is peace as it is said, “All her paths are peace” (Prov. 3:17). And if a man comes back from a journey, they greet him with peace, and they ask for peace morning and evening. After reading the Shema, they end with “who spreads the tent of His peace on His people.” The daily prayer ends with peace and the priestly benediction likewise.[8]

The gracious gift of peace to Pinchas is an occasion for a restatement of the wholeness that governs the world and makes explicit the purpose of Torah, divine revelation, which is to lead humans to shalom or wholeness. Note that the bridge between the general statement of sovereignty and the liturgical expressions of peace in the Shema and Amida is the greeting of the man upon return from a journey. It is that greeting of peace that leads to his participation in the community that gathers for prayer and petitions for the blessing of peace.

The cultic offering of the *Zevah Shelemim* on the altar (Leviticus 3:1) also provides an insight into the role played by “shalom” as greeting. In his commentary on Leviticus, Baruch Levine translates

this phrase as “the sacred gift of greeting.” He points out that the *zevah* offering was shared between the deity, the priesthood and the worshipper. In the cult, the *shelaimim* assumed the form of an animal sacrifice offered to God when one came before Him to greet Him at a sacred meal. It was adopted as the name of a particular sacrifice because it expressed the fellowship experienced by worshippers and priests in God’s presence, as they greeted their divine guest.[9] The offering was a sign of wholeness between humanity and deity that the Rabbis interpreted as an admonition to work for peace among terrestrial creatures.

Come and see how great is the reward of one who brings about peace between one human being and another. Scripture states, “Out of peaceful [whole] stones you shall build the altar of the Lord your God.” (Deut. 27:6). Now these stones can neither hear nor see; they cannot smell or speak. But since, through the offerings which come upon them, they spread peace between humans, they are saved from the sword because Scripture ordains “You shall not lift up any iron tool upon them.” (Deut 26:5) How much more must this apply to a human being who can hear and see, and who can smell and speak, if he promote peace between a person and his neighbor.[10]

The contrast between the commandments regarding the building of the inanimate altar that serves as the point of mediation between humanity and God with the sentient human being is a clear indication of the obligation of human beings to imitate the act of sacrificial worship and bring wholeness to their world. Shalom is created between God and humans by the sacrifices on the altar made of whole stones. It is promoted by human beings whose sentient nature impels them to work of peace.

Aaron the High Priest: a paradigm for shalom

Aaron becomes the paradigmatic figure in the human pursuit of peace. A statement ascribed to Hillel admonishes, “Be of the disciples of Aaron loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow-creatures and drawing them nearer to the Torah.”[11] The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan expands upon this passage referring Aaron’s action to Malachi 2:6 “He turned many away from iniquity” describing the exemplary behavior of Aaron. If Aaron met an evil man on the road he greeted him with the words, Shalom ‘aleichem. If that man wanted to commit a sin on the next day, he said, “Woe is me. How could I then lift up my eyes and look at Aaron. I should be ashamed before him for he gave me the greeting of peace. Aaron is also described as placating to quarreling neighbors until they embraced.[12] The virtue of establishing a peaceful marital life, *shalom bayit* is also ascribed to the activities of Aaron.[13]

In this pursuit of wholeness the altar and its perpetual servant are unified into the activity of spreading shalom. Note that in the first example from the Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan it is the greeting that evokes the acts of inner contrition by the man who wanted to sin. It was his anamnesis of Aaron’s greeting “Shalom ‘aleichem” that precluded his proposed transgression.

From the act of drawing disciples of peace to the Aaronide blessing of peace the Rabbis drew upon the power that shalom held over the universal activities of human beings. They composed a litany of the gifts of peace that are linked to prophetic statements. In the literary structure of this passage we can discern the artistic grace of rabbinic homiletics and the singular role of peace as weaving a garment of wholeness:

Great is peace for it is equal to everything, as it is said, “He makes peace and creates all.” (Is. 54:7).

Great is peace for even if Israelites worship idols, and peace is among them, God, as it were says,

“Satan cannot touch them,” as it is said “Ephraim is joined to idols, let it alone.” (Hosea 4:17)

Great is peace, for it is given to the penitent, as it is said, “Creator of the fruit of the lips, peace, peace to the far and to the near” (Is. 57:19)

Great is peace, for God has given no more beautiful gift to the righteous; for when a righteous man passes from the world, three companies of ministering angels go before him. The first says,”He shall enter into peace; the second says, “He shall rest on his bed;” the third says, “He walks uprightly.” (Is. 57:2)

Torah is compared only with peace, as it is said, “And all its paths are peace.” (Prov. 3:17)

God comforts Jerusalem only with peace, as it is said, “And my people shall dwell in a habitation of peace.” (Is. 33:18)[14]

These statements indicate the microcosmic nature of peace within rabbinic thought. Peace stays divine punishment for Israel’s idolatry. It offers the way for the penitent to return to God. It accompanies the righteous as they enter the next world in the company of the angels. Torah – the path of Jewish life – is compared to peace. Finally, the ultimate horizon of Jewish eschatological thought, the restoration of Jerusalem is described in terms of God bringing peace to the city. Both humanity and divinity are drawn together in a circle of peace.

“For the sake of peace:” a prudential path

These descriptions of Aaron’s activities, the offerings on the altar, and the cosmic dance of peace with humanity is also cast in a series of prudential statements by the Rabbis. They offer a number of human situations where quarrels are likely to arise, and in each case they establish a social order that allows for the maintenance of the social order. The discussion is held in Mishnah Gittin 5:5. “These are the things that they (the Sages) declared for the sake of peace.” The list beings with the proper order of calling people to the reading of the Scriptural lection and continues with how the communal cooking within a courtyard should be ordered. Quarrels over the sources of water in the cistern, the proper order of trapping animals to avoid theft are also settled. Activities where Jews mix with non-Jews such as gleaning are permitted for the sake of peace. The list concludes with two activities relating specifically to non-Jew. They are permitted a blessing when they work the fields during the seventh year, where as Israelites are not given such a blessing. It is also permitted to greet non-Jews “for the sake of peace.”

The activities described in Mishnah Gittin become the basis for social and commercial activities between Jews and non-Jews in later Jewish law. It is noteworthy that the greeting is permitted because it draws the non-Jew into the ambit of peace. Perhaps it is not the peace that we have discerned within the intimacy of those who are within the covenanted Israelite community. However, the extension of greeting is an indication that bringing the message of peace, of Torah, is

extended as part of the prudence that Israel would exercise in its long march toward the eschatological horizon of peace.

Conclusions

We have discerned that within the early strata of the Oral Law, the idea of peace or wholeness is to be found within the very nature of deity. It is a unique gift of divine mercy and grace which is bestowed upon the Jewish people. However, it is equally true that Jews are admonished to fill their daily lives with the pursuit of peace or wholeness within the world that they inhabit. They are to live the reality of their prayerful petitions by establishing a social network of peace and harmony.

In commenting on Psalm 24:14, the Rabbis state that, “The Torah does not order you to run after or pursue the commandments, but only to fulfill them when the appropriate occasions come. But you must seek peace in your own place and run after it to another.”[15] Human activity is the key element in the pursuit of peace as we learn from Rabbi Simeon ben Elazar, “If a man sits in his place and keeps silent, how can he pursue peace in Israel between one person and another. But let him leave his place and roam about in the world and pursue peace in Israel.” The passage concludes with an allusion to the same psalm text, “Seek peace in your own dwelling place and pursue it in another place.”[16]

In this manner we can discern that Jews move toward greeting their fellow human beings with a greeting which expresses both an immediate and an eschatological hope. The wish of shalom – of peace be upon you – impels them to bring the divine gift of peace to their own people and to others in the world. It is their firm conviction that “The disciples of the wise increase peace in the world, as it is said, “And all your children shall be taught of the Lord and great shall be the shalom of your children.” The Rabbis suggest that the final word be vocalized not *banayikh* (your children) but *bonayikh* (your builders). Every greeting of peace is an opportunity to build harmony in the world – the shalom or wholeness of peace and realize within the human realm the blessing held out by the Torah – those who build peace bring about the blessing of peace.

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, “No Religion is an Island” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays Abraham Joshua Heschel*, edited by Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar. Straus. Giroux, 1996), 238-39.
2. “Peace” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*; cf. Eugene J. Fisher, “Shalom in the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament” in *The Challenge of Shalom for Catholics and Jews: A Dialogical Discussion Guide to the Bishops’ Pastoral on Peace and War* (UAHC Department of Education and NCCB 1985), 1-3.
3. Canticles Rabbi 1:1.
4. The weekday prayer is “Who spreads a tabernacle of peace on Israel.” Some liberal prayerbooks include the phrase “and over the world.”
5. Nu. 6:24-26.
6. Mishnah Berakhot 2:1. The second Mishnah defines between the sections as between the first blessing and the second; between the second to Shema; between Shema to “and it shall come to pass” and between “It shall come to pass” to “And God spoke to Moses” and between “And God spoke to Moses” to “True and enduring.”
7. T.B. Berakhot 17a.
8. Num. R. Pinchas, 21:1.
9. Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 14-15.
10. Pesikta Rabbati 199b
11. Pirqe Abot 1:12.
12. Abot d’Rabbi Nathan 12, 24b
13. Abot d’Rabbi Nathan 25, 25b

14. Numbers Rabbah, Naso 11:7.
15. Numbers Rabbah, Hukkat, 19:27.
16. Abot d’Rabbi Nathan, 12, 26a.

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